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Finding funding for a rural emergency notification system

By Jerry Brant, Special to PoliceOne

The ability to instantly notify millions of individuals of a potentially hazardous situation in a matter of minutes through their cell phones sounds incredible and could save countless lives. The drawback to this concept? Large portions of rural areas in the United States have no cell service.

But working in partnership with their state government or tribal community, rural fire departments, and other public safety agencies have the opportunity to ensure their residents will be part of the forthcoming National Emergency Alert System.

The interoperable system will utilize all forms of telecommunication available to enable maximum coverage and the ability to notify all residents regardless of their location. This concept to develop a state-of-the-art emergency notification system was part of the WARN (Warning, Alert, and Response Network) Act passed by Congress in fall 2006.

The Act calls for the development of a national system to alert the American people in situations of war, terrorist attack, natural disaster, or other hazards impacting public safety and wellbeing.

A major component of this arrangement includes the voluntary participation of commercial cell phone companies as part of the network. At the present time, most of the major carriers have indicated that they will participate in the new system.

While it all adds up to a major breakthrough for all of us involved in emergency services, it is tempered by the lack of cell phone service in many rural areas. However, to address this limitation, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has announced the availability of \$2 million in funding under the Remote Community Alert System Program 2010.

This funding opportunity will offer grants to state governments and tribal communities to provide for outdoor alerting technologies in remote communities underserved by commercial mobile service for the purpose of allowing residents of those areas to receive emergency messages.

The program defines a remote community as an area of a county with a population density of 100 persons or less per square mile based on the most recently available Census data. It also identifies an effectively underserved area as a remote community that does not receive commercial mobile service as demonstrated by coverage maps, technical analysis, field tests or other reasonable means.

If you believe that all or part of your department's coverage area may qualify under this program, then your first step is to identify the agency in your state government that could serve as the applicant for this funding opportunity. This may be the state emergency management agency, state public safety commissioner, or the state homeland security office.

Contact them to see if they are aware of this grant program. If the agency is, then inquire if your department can participate as a partner in their application. If your state is not assembling a collaborative to address this situation, then encourage them to do so by describing your situation and your willingness to be a contributing partner in this effort.

The five key points to remember if you want to have a competitive application are:

- 1) Only state governments and tribal communities can be the applicant for these funds. If a local government or police department applies, their application will not be considered regardless of how great their need is or how well the application is written.
- 2) Priority is given to applications that assemble a collaborative of potential stakeholders including local and county governments, emergency service providers, academia and the private sector.
- 3) The program is focusing on new and emerging technologies to address the identified needs for your area. If this is not your area of expertise, then you may want to look for resources that are available in your area to assist you in developing such a system. Some possible candidates are colleges and universities especially those with telecommunication programs, and vendors who feature such equipment.
- 4) The applications are reviewed by an independent panel. Scores are based on the applicant's ability to adequately address the evaluation criteria listed in the announcement.
- 5) There is no match required under this program.

Unlike many other funding opportunities, you have a substantial amount of time to assemble this application — the closing date is February 26, 2010. This should give you a sufficient amount of time to discuss your needs with your state government, identify partners for your project, investigate available technology, develop a sound approach to your problem, and assemble a competitive application.

You can find the grant announcement in the July 16 issue of the Federal Register or go to Grants.gov to learn more about this opportunity.

Good luck.

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